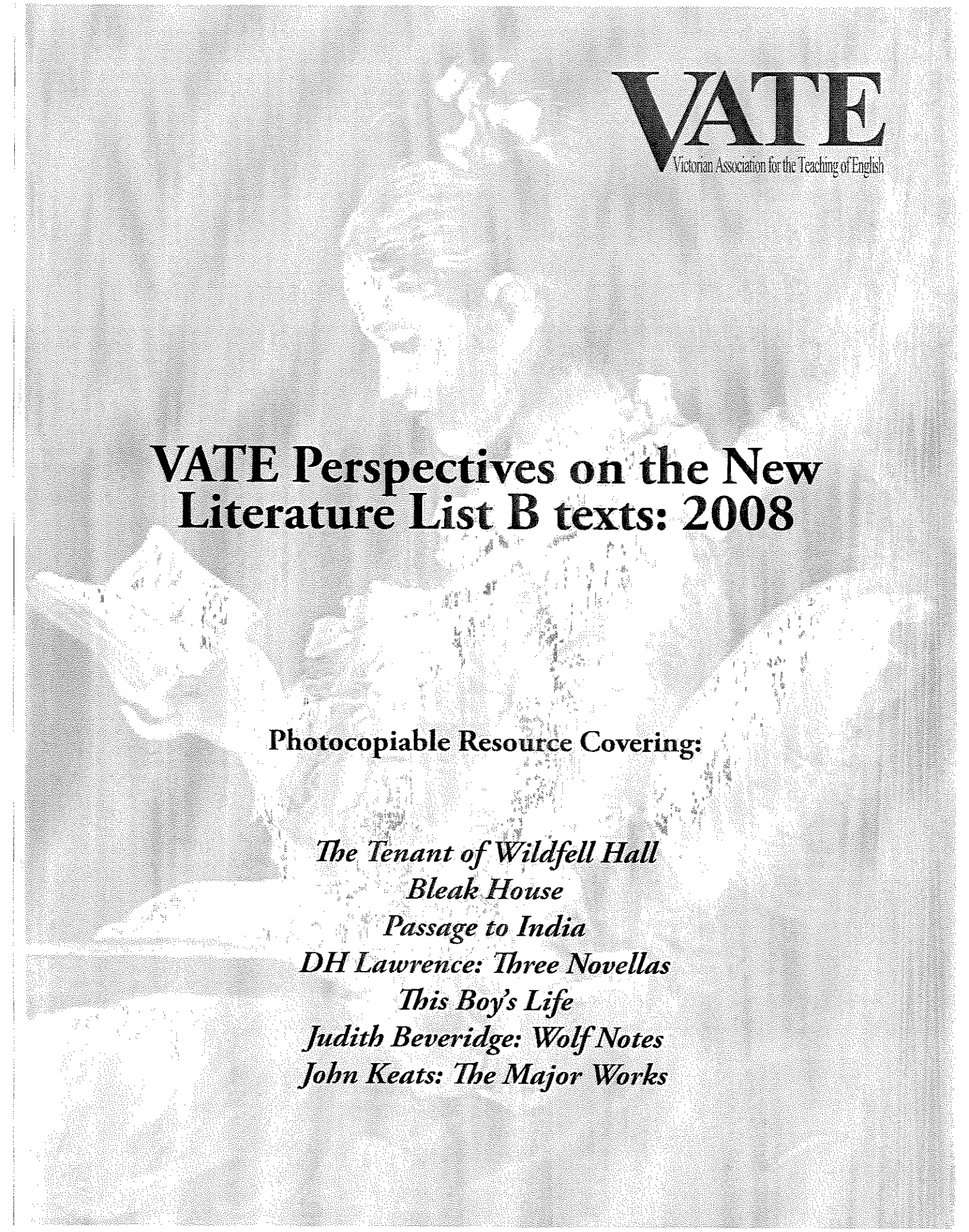

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VATE Perspectives on the New List B Literature Texts: 2008

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The Tenant of Wildfell Hall

by Anne Bronte

Perspective by Erica Hateley

> Yes, there was another barrier: doubtless there was a wide distinction between the rank and circumstances of Mrs Huntingdon, the lady of Grassdale Manor, and those of Mrs Graham the artist, the tenant of Wildfell Hall. (Brontë 450)

First published in 1848 Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* both is and is not the quintessential Victorian novel. Insofar as it aims for social realism and pursues a domestic, romance plot it is; insofar as it seeks to critique its social and domestic contexts (albeit displaced as historical narrative) it is not. Just as Gilbert Markham notes barriers between the various "Helens" he knows, there are potentially a number of barriers between contemporary readers and Anne Brontë's wonderful novel. For many years, *Tenant* was neglected, willfully overlooked or ignored as an uninteresting, poorly-constructed novel not on a par with the celebrated works of Anne's sisters. In an otherwise revolutionary reading of the Brontës's novels, Marxist critic Terry Eagleton bluntly but representatively stated that, "the orthodox critical judgement that Anne Brontë's work is slighter than her sisters' is just" (133). Recently, however, critics have come to re-read *Tenant* with an eye, less for comparison with the work of Emily and Charlotte Brontë, than for the novel on its own terms. In the spirit of this new gaze, I am offering here an account of the aspects of the novel I find most fascinating and critically engaging. In fact, certain of these points mark my direct opposition with a critic I ordinarily find insightful when he writes to complain that:

> The language of Anne Brontë's work is that of morality rather than imagination: her fiction is concerned neither with submerged depths nor with far horizons, but with the criteria by which men and women should act well. (Eagleton 137)

I believe it is precisely Brontë's concern with domestic morality and the 'criteria by which people should act well' which marks the novel as fascinating. In terms of literary studies, the ways in which acting well is linked with reading well offers an obvious entrance point to the novel. Early in the novel Gilbert Markham explicitly links the concept of storytelling, or narrative, with the metaphor of economics, transaction, and exchange:

> This is the first instalment of my debt. If the coin suits you, tell me so, and I'll send you the rest at my leisure: if you would rather remain my creditor than stuff your purse with such ungainly heavy pieces, -- tell me still, and I'll pardon your bad taste, and willingly keep the treasure to myself. (Brontë 21)

Thus *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* foregrounds its deep interest in how we produce and understand narrative meaning, both as readers and as people living in the world. The self-conscious narration that structures the novel continually enacts this trope of transaction both between characters in the novel, and between the novel and its readers.

In my experience, students are often initially uninterested in discussing the nuts and bolts of how texts are put together, but it does not usually take long to engage them in the fascinating issues of how *Tenant* offers multiple first-person, self-conscious narratives, rendered as personal documents such as letters and diaries. These genres are familiar (even if only as e-mails and blogs) to most people, particularly as genres in which writers might share more than they are willing or able to 'say'. That is, the speaker may be giving the reader unique and privileged insight into characters or events, or, willfully misleading and deceiving the reader. Crucially, first-person narratives offer only a single perspective on the events they describe, but in doing so

offer opportunities to identify with a perspective other than one's own. That said, the function of a diary shifts according to the implied readership. As Gordon notes, "the diary, once having gone from [Helen's] hands, cannot return to her in the same way. It suddenly has a "currency," an exchange value that is quite different from its value as self-reflection *for her*" (728). Therefore, readers are immediately faced with both the benefits and the drawbacks of first-person narration, and are positioned to consider the implications of their own status as audience/reader changing the meaning and function of the text they are reading.

When considering reader positioning, there are clear examples of foreshadowing being enabled by the first-person narration, as when Chapter 31 ends with Helen's account of Annabella's "improvement from the period when she ceased to hope and strive for Arthur's admiration" (Brontë 280), and the next chapter concludes with a similar celebration of Arthur displaying "a marked difference in his general temper and appearance" (Brontë 294), just prior to the revelation of Arthur and Annabella's adultery. Related but different effects of first-person narration, such as reader manipulation, can be seen where Gilbert defers the conclusion to his narrative by "settling the business of one or two of the characters introduced in the course of this narrative" (Brontë 456), or interpolating Halford as a reader who "would say I had made it too long already; but for *your* satisfaction, I will add a few words more" (485).

Even further, these narratives are nested or framed, which raises a range of interpretive questions. Given that Gilbert clearly has ownership both of Helen's journal and several of her letters, there is a power relationship built into the narrative as a whole. It is a point of debate whether his dissemination of her private thoughts and words is exploitation or empowerment. In other words, is Gilbert re-enacting Arthur's violation of Helen when he forcibly reads her journal – in an act that borders on symbolic rape (ca Brontë 364) – or is he bringing to light a female voice that would ordinarily be unheard in Victorian England?

Some feminist critics have seen the framing device as Brontë's capitulation to patriarchal norms about who has the right to speak "publicly", in that "the woman's story is somehow recontained by the male narrator of the frame" (Stewart 81), and it is true that Gilbert exercises a kind of control over the journal insofar as he can apparently elect to circulate it or not, and admits to editorial action: "you shall have the whole, save, perhaps, a few passages here and there of merely temporal interest to the writer, or such as would serve to encumber the story rather than elucidate it" (Brontë 129). However (and I write as a feminist critic) my own feeling is that this framing device is enabling rather than disabling of Helen's personal account. It may be regrettable that female voices were not politically valued in the mid-nineteenth century, but so it was, and Brontë strikes me as negotiating with this fact by (somewhat ironically) deploying Markham's mostly petulant account of personal suffering as introduction to (and possible juxtaposition with) Helen's brutally disturbing account of real physical and emotional suffering.

The narrative ploy of the journal found or transmitted was not new to the novel genre, however Brontë's use of this ploy to place on centre stage a first-person female voice untrammelled by social mores or niceties provides readers with insight into an unhappy marriage from the woman's perspective. Presumably there is no need to self-edit despite the self-consciousness inherent in the journal genre.

This marriage plot is perhaps the most radical element of *Tenant*. Brontë seems to mobilise quite clearly a critique of the social and legal definitions of marriage and gendered agency dominant in the mid-nineteenth century in England. This is true both in terms of the plot itself, and the novel's attempt to render such a plot. The romance

plot has been central to the novel genre since its inception in the eighteenth century; however, much like fairy tales, novels tended to represent courtship rather than marriage, and thus:

> courtship, which is magnified into the most important and exciting part of a girl's life, brief though courtship is, because it is the part of her life in which she most counts as a person herself. After marriage she ceases to be wooed, her consent is no longer sought, she derives her status from her husband, and her personal identity is thus snuffed out. (Lieberman 394)

This point about the loss of feminine agency can be mapped on to the majority of English novels produced in the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. This is understandable given the legal state of affairs which informs Brontë's novel but which is likely to be unfamiliar to contemporary readers:

> Prior to the Divorce Act of 1857 the only way to end a marriage other than by ecclesiastical annulment was by private Act of Parliament, an extraordinarily complex and expensive procedure. Even under the Divorce Act, only if a husband was physically cruel, incestuous, or bestial in addition to being adulterous could his wife procure a divorce. If she left him without first obtaining a divorce, she was guilty of desertion and forfeited all claim to a share of his property (even that which she might have brought to the marriage) and to custody of their children. (Shanley 9)

Thus, Annabella may be sued for divorce but Helen may not sue for divorce.

Therefore, while it would be anachronistic to attribute to Anne Brontë or her writing anything like contemporary feminism, *Tenant* is deeply interested in feminine experience and agency in nineteenth-century England. In reference to this issue, while the novel as a whole engages with such questions, Chapter 32: "Comparisons: Information Rejected" in particular strikes me as foregrounding the female experience as Milicent and Helen discuss not only their own marriages, but the future of Esther Hargrave. Helen writes in her diary:

> How odd it is that we so often weep for each other's distresses, when we shed not a tear for our own! Her heart has been full enough of her own sorrows, but it overflowed at the idea of mine; -- and I too shed tears at the sight of her sympathetic emotion, though I had not wept for myself for many a week. (Brontë 284)

This blunt statement of women communicating with each other about their 'lot' disrupts conventional understandings of the silently-suffering, nineteenth-century wife, and privileges a community of women which operates alongside but separate from the dominant patriarchy.

The novel considers the ways in which men and women are conditioned and/or trained to become gendered adults, as when Helen asserts, "You would have us encourage our sons to prove all things by their own experience, while our daughters must not even profit by the experience of others" (Brontë 34). This assertion is thrown into relief by the title of Chapter 16, "The Warnings of Experience", and indeed, the Huntingdon plot as a whole. Although the concept of childhood conditioning (nurture) is identified as central to adult behaviours and attitudes – as is demonstrated literally when Helen conditions her son to dislike alcohol (Brontë 369-70) – it is also suggested that when men are encouraged to always act as they did when they were children, social disintegration follows.

So, Arthur Huntingdon never ceases to act in a childish or childlike manner, and Gilbert must learn to not throw tantrums "like a passionate child" (Brontë 107). It is important that Gilbert Markham is not an unproblematically positive or likeable character. It is true that the novel resolves his situation via an unsurprising romance between him and

Helen, but it does not set up a simple opposition between "bad Arthur" and "good Gilbert". Indeed, he reveals himself to be as capable as Arthur of unthinking violence:

> It was not without a feeling of savage satisfaction that I beheld the instant, deadly pallor that overspread his face, and the few red drops that trickled down his forehead, while he reeled a moment in his saddle, and then fell backward to the ground. [...] Had I killed him? - an icy hand seemed to grasp my heart and check its pulsation, as I bent over him, gazing with breathless intensity upon the ghastly, upturned face. But no; he moved his eyelids and uttered a slight groan. I breathed again - he was only stunned by the fall. It served him right - it would teach him better manners in future. Should I help him to his horse? No. (Brontë 116)

Readers may remember such actions as they read about Arthur Huntingdon's early mistreatment of Helen. While both men are constructed as childlike or childish to a degree, the reader is nonetheless invited to view their developments as positive or negative. Where Gilbert notionally acquires a degree of self-control and maturity, Arthur slides into alcoholism, adultery and abuse. Helen writes matter-of-factly that Arthur's "appetite for the stimulus of wine had increased upon him, as I had too well foreseen. It was something more to him than an accessory to social enjoyment: it was an important source of enjoyment in itself" (Brontë 260). Of course, we only have Gilbert's account of himself rather than Helen's perspective, but readers are encouraged to accept that account.

Given such ideas about masculinity and maturity, the character of Ralph Hattersley may be one of the most interesting case-studies in the whole novel insofar as he is neither 'good' nor 'bad', but is, rather, a man who evolves and learns to travel from one extreme to the other.

All of these issues of agency, individuality, responsibility, gender and maturity are inflected in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* by questions of religious doctrine and ideology, most clearly a peculiarly nineteenth-century model of Evangelical Christianity to which Anne Brontë adhered. While this issue is present throughout the novel, I do not believe it is necessary for any and all discussions *about* the novel. To those who are interested in the nuances of the novel's religious discourse, I recommend Marianne Thormählen's *The Brontës and Religion* (1999).

I have been able to offer here only the briefest of suggestions about some of the many approaches which might be taken to Brontë's novel. There is comparatively little criticism of *Tenant* available when compared with the works of the other Brontë sisters, but I believe this offers teachers and students a level of freedom from critical orthodoxy. However, for those who are interested in acquiring an overview of *Tenant* criticism, the following texts are useful:

Berry, Elizabeth Hollis. *Anne Brontë's Radical Vision: Structures of Consciousness.* Victoria: English Literary Studies Monographs, 1994.

Nash, Julie and Suess, Barbara A. (eds). *New Approaches to the Literary Art of Anne Brontë.* Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001.

I am also happy to correspond with people about this wonderful novel. I can be reached at Erica.Hateley@gmail.com

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Brontë, Anne. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall.* 1848. ed. Stevie Davies. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996.

Gordon, Jan B. "Gossip, Diary, Letter, Text: Anne Brontë's Narrative *Tenant* and the Problematic of the Gothic Sequel." *English Literary History* 51.4 (1984): 719-745.

Eagleton, Terry. *Myths of Power: A Marxist Study of the Brontës.* London: Macmillan, 1975.

Lieberman, Marcia. ""Some Day My Prince Will Come": Female Acculturation through the Fairy Tale." *College English* 34.3 (1972): 383-395.

Shanley, Mary Lyndon. *Feminism, Marriage, and the Law in Victorian England, 1850-1895.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989.

Stewart, Garrett. "Narrative Economies in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall.*" *New Approaches to the Literary Art of Anne Brontë.* Eds. Julie Nash and Barbara A. Suess. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001. 75-102.

Possible Classroom Activities:

** render any episode/event in third-person narration

** reinforces student familiarity with textual detail and invites consideration of what is knowable within a first-person narrative

** render any episode in the novel from the perspective of the person spoken *about* (for example, a dinner at Grassdale from Arthur Huntingdon's perspective; the social gathering recounted in Chapter 3 from Helen's perspective).

** again, reinforces student familiarity with textual and formal detail, and considers alternative viewpoints.

** catalogue positive and negative qualities of individual characters (for example, Helen versus Annabella) or roles (for example, mothers or husbands).

** rapidly reveals the novel's ideological stance on issues and ideas

** locate contemporary equivalents for the novel, both in terms of form and content (for example, novels told through diaries or letters/e-mails or blogs)

** engages students in questions of formal composition

** write responses/analyse closely clearly symbolic/allegorical moments in the novel in order to consider the ways in which they offer insight in to the novel as a whole.
e.g. Huntingdon's narrative about drinking and gambling (189-93)
Helen's turtledove painting (159)
Milicent's letters (258 and 380)
The game of chess (299)

** research the historical personage of Caroline Norton

** encourages students to engage with context of production and reception (particularly as *Tenant* is written in the 1840s but set primarily in the 1820s; the pre-Victorian and Victorian connotations of this gap may be invisible to contemporary readers) in terms of legal agency and gender. It can be confusing to students that Helen is wealthy but does not pursue an independent life earlier in her marriage. Caroline Norton's circumstances were well-known to the point that one critic has described a narrative of "a brutal and/or egregiously adulterous husband is repeatedly excused, forgiven, and often nursed by the heroic wife until finally he or she dies" (Humpherys 44) as the "Caroline Norton plot" (44). There may even be an opportunity in feminist classrooms to research current divorce legislation, or the history of divorce legislation in Australia.

** watch the 1996 television adaptation of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (starring Tara Fitzgerald, Toby Stephens, and Rupert Graves; directed by Mike Barker) as a group.

** this is obvious if using *Tenant* for Outcome 1, but is useful even if using the novel for Outcome 2 given the 'third-person camera' which dominates in literary adaptations made by the BBC, but which is not the only cinematic gaze used in this adaptation (cf. alternative viewpoints). Nonetheless, the camera invites us to look 'at' rather than 'with' Helen for the course of her marriage to Arthur Huntingdon.

** useful for analysis of the novel in that the television production alters the ending and augments the 'unhealthy' influence Arthur Sr. is having on Arthur Jr. to encompass behaviours not considered inappropriate in the nineteenth century (i.e. hunting), but which are considered somewhat inappropriate in the late-twentieth-/early-twenty-first-centuries, and to consider then not just what these differences are, but why they are significant.

** track the novel's representations of literal and symbolic reading and writing

** encourages close literal and analytical reading in students who are invited to track the novel's use of books or libraries or writing. Provides insight into the ways in which Brontë privileges or critiques characters.

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Brontë, Anne. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall.* 1848. ed. Stevie Davies. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996.

Humpherys, Anne. "Breaking Apart: The Early Victorian Divorce Novel." *Victorian Women Writers and the Woman Question.* Ed. Nicola Diane Thompson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. 42-59.